

## **The Effect Early Pioneer Farmers Had on Government in Illinois**

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Illinois pioneering farm families came from various backgrounds. This was important in local government. Typically, if a region of farmers originated from a particular area, laws from their origin influenced the laws being made in their new area.

Illinois pioneering farmers fall into three groups. The first group, the French, were the first permanent non-Native American settlers. The second group, the Southerners, came after the Revolutionary War. They were mainly citizens of the United States who originally settled in the southern states and moved on to Illinois for better opportunities. The third group, the Europeans, came especially from Germany and Ireland after the 1830s. Illinois had an excellent reputation for its fertile soil, and most of these pioneers were farmers.

Life in Illinois in the eighteenth century and before any formal government was organized is described as being moral, honest, and innocent. Life after the population increased became more complicated; hence, the need for the government to protect and settle disputes was necessary.

Early French pioneers from 1734 to 1754 were friendly with each other because they had to rely on each other for their well being. This attitude passed from generation to generation. They were strong in their Roman Catholic faith; hence, their original community life was governed by the beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church. Pioneer French farmers used their church not only for ceremonial masses, but also for political purposes. In the year 1760 the village of Prairie Du Pont was settled by pioneer farmers from other French villages. It was a prosperous settlement. In 1765 it contained fourteen families. These families agreed on how to make and repair the fence of their own common field. Each owner repaired the fence that passed over his land. If land was abandoned, the land would be sold at church to anyone who would make the necessary repairs to it. No regular court of law existed prior to 1765. Before 1765 the customs and laws of France were recognized, and the pioneers followed them. Any politics or rules that they made were reflected on the laws from their homeland.

After 1765 the British took over territorial control and their laws influenced the original pioneer settlers. General Gage, commander-in-chief of all British forces in North America, drafted a proclamation providing a kind of constitution for the governance of Illinois. Catholics were given the right to worship and many other benefits. Very few settlers in Illinois during this time were from England, save those in top government posts. The settlers at this time were mostly farmers who settled in Illinois to benefit from the freedom given them. These early pioneers had very crude laws, which were not written, and public opinion was the basis for most of them. Most serious crimes such as horse or cattle stealing were handled or enforced by the threat of lynch law.

The first substantial influx of inhabitants from the southern states came after the Revolutionary War in 1779 when Illinois was a county of Virginia. Many of these Illinois settlers were poor yeoman farmers, small farmers who cultivate their own land, who had been cheated of good land in Kentucky or Tennessee. They settled in the southern third of Illinois. Because of their experiences with unjust laws from their previous settlements, they were more content with

fewer laws and restrictions. Politics at this time was built largely on favors and relatives. The legal system was not well designed for the administration of justice. Jurors would not vote to convict a kinsman. The usual punishment for crimes was a fine or whipping. A horse thief, for example, might have gotten fifty lashes and a few days in jail or a fine.

Illinois was part of the Northwest Territory for about thirteen years. The ordinance of 1787 created a government for the Northwest Territory. The villages of Illinois did not see their authorized chief for two years.

One important event happened that foretold of the early settlers' desire for a fairer and more democratic society. After the spring of 1787, when the Americans failed to capture control of the court of Kaskaskia, the settlers of Bellefontaine determined to establish a rival and independent court, for which purpose they held an election and chose magistrates. This was an affront to the one French court that had proved its right to exist.

Robert Watts, the French court appointee, addressed the court in Cahokia about the danger that threatened the law and order of the district by this revolution. The court at Cahokia was the only stable power in Illinois at this time, and with a rival court of Americans might have followed disorders that might have produced a civil war. The court of Cahokia acted by prohibiting the holding of any independent assemblies of the people or sessions of the proposed court. The court ordered the movement's leaders in chains for twenty-four hours, and if they disobeyed the new laws, they would be driven from the territory. The Cahokia justices, however, also knew they had to take some measures to satisfy the demands of the Americans.

The right of electing a justice of the peace at each of the two chief settlements was granted at the October session of 1787. On November 2, 1787, a militia officer was also elected by the settlers of Bellefontaine. On April 27, 1790, the representative of the United States erected the county of St. Clair and appointed the judges of the new courts. Cahokia settlers, however, proved they were more capable of self-government. In October 1794, Judge Turner from St. Clair County wanted to shift Cahokia's center of government to Kaskaskia. The settlers petitioned congress for redress and Judge Turner resigned.

In 1800, the population of the Illinois country remained almost unchanged. Soon afterward, as the author Clarence Alvord wrote in his book, *The Illinois Country 1673-1818*, "there was taking place the most important event in the history of the United States and one of the most momentous in the history of humanity – the occupation of the great Mississippi Valley by men of English speech. What the French and British had failed to accomplish, was being brought to pass by the pioneers acting on their own initiative in the hope of bettering their economic condition."

The base of local government was created in the political township. Legislation in 1802, when Illinois was part of the Indiana Territory, provided this. On January 18, 1802, an act was approved that all free males over the age of twenty-one would meet on the first Monday of April to elect township officials. The township clerk, three or more trustees or managers, two or more overseers of the poor, three fence viewers, one lister of taxable property, a sufficient number of supervisors for roads, and one or more constables were the positions to be filled. Between 1800 and 1809, the pioneer farmers were paying more attention to the prairie territory, and by 1806 their population more than doubled.

Illinois settlers began agitating in early 1812 for the right to elect their officials. Referendums were called that proved that public sentiment was nearly unanimous for the change. On September 14, 1812, Governor Edwards proclaimed that an election be held on October 8 - 10 for delegate members of the council and representatives. The right to vote happened because

of these referendums. They were signed mostly by farmers. They asked for the extension of suffrage and the privilege of electing a delegate by popular vote. It also provided that five councilors should be elected in five districts to be designated by the governor and the delegate to congress to be elected by the people instead of by the legislature. This law made the Illinois government the most democratic of any territorial government in the United States at the time. [From Clarence Alvord, *The Illinois Country 1673-1818*; Solon Buck, *Illinois in 1818*; John Cambal, *Reclaiming a Lost Heritage*; John Clayton, *The Illinois Fact Book*; Robert Howard, *Illinois*; Richard Jenson, *Illinois*; Calvin Pease, *The Story of Illinois*; John Reynolds, *The Pioneer History of Illinois*.]